

Introduction to Embellishing
Renaissance Music by Bill Long



Introduction to Embellishment of Renaissance Music by Bill Long

What is Embellishment?

Embellishment is adding notes to a part to make it more interesting for the player and listener. In *The Division Viol*, Christopher Simpson says of embellishment,

In this manner of Play, which is the perfection of the *Viol*, or any other Instrument, if it be exactly performed, a man may shew the Excellency both of his Hand and Invention, to the delight and admiration of those that hear him.

It probably started when dance band players got tired of playing the same tune over and over and started to change it a little each time, improvising a few trills on the first repeat, some runs the second time through, then progressing to increasingly virtuosic passagework. The players' inspirations were soon codified into sets of rules that found their way into the instrumental instruction books of the time. These have found their way to us, so we can add embellish renaissance music in a way that is probably pretty close to the way it was done four centuries ago.

About This Paper

This paper is intended as practical introduction, mainly for the recorder player, especially the recorder player performing renaissance dances. In writing it, I've taken information from six sources, two primary and four secondary, namely:

- ☛ Brown, Howard Mayer (1976). *Embellishing 16th-Century Music*, London: Oxford University Press.
- ☛ Dart, Thurston (1961). Notes to *Twenty-Four Pieces from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, London: Stainer & Bell Ltd;
- ☛ Dart, Thurston (1961). notes to *Parthenia In-Violata*, New York, C. F. Peters.
- ☛ Ganassi, Sylvestro (1535), edited by Hildemarie Peter. *Opera Intitulate Fontegara*, Venice.
- ☛ Gleason, Harold (1996), edited by Catharine Crozier Gleason. *Method of Organ Playing, Eightj Edition*, Toronto: Prentice-Hall
- ☛ Simpson, Christopher (1659). *The Division-Viol*, London.

Throughout, I've oversimplified shamelessly and left out any scholarly citations. Anyone interested in getting a scholarly grasp of the subject should go to the sources above which will, in turn, open the door to hundreds of books and articles on the subject. Brown's brief volume is especially helpful. It seems to be out of print now, but it's still possible to get copies through resellers.

Types of Embellishment

Graces

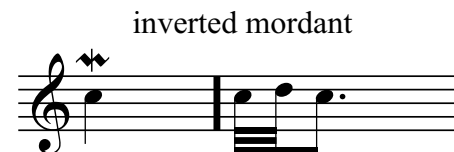
The easiest embellishments to improvise are the graces. These are trills and other short ornaments. Among them are four main types:

- ☞ Inverted mordant
- ☞ Trill
- ☞ Slide
- ☞ Cadential pattern

You can invent other graces by combining these basic types.

In the baroque era there was an elaborate set of symbols for the different ornaments. That's not the case in the renaissance, so we'll adapt some symbols from the baroque and renaissance just for simplicity.

The inverted mordant is a quick jump up a step from the main note to the auxiliary note, then back.



trill



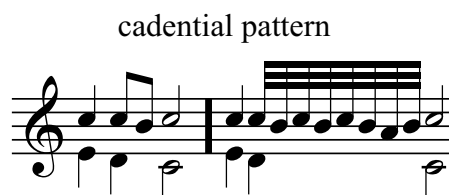
The trill is just an inverted mordant with more "wiggles". Note that by going up from the main note to the auxiliary, these renaissance ornaments go in the opposite direction from the more familiar baroque counterparts.

slide



In the slide, the player just slips up to the main note.

Cadential patterns are the renaissance version of the obligatory cadential trill in baroque music. The example shows the most common pattern.



Divisions

Divisions connect notes of the melody with rapid scale-like passages. They are called divisions because they “divide” a long melody note into a bunch of short notes. Divisions are sometimes called *diminutions* in English, or *passaggi* in Italian. There are a lot of less common names in various languages.

The method for creating divisions is described by Sylvestro Ganassi in his *Fontegara* as follows:

...every division must begin and end with the same note as the unornamented ground...so doing, it will be a tastefully constructed ornament.

Most commonly, a note is broken up into two or four notes. Sixteenth century writers described more virtuosic and complicated metrical divisions, but we we’ll stick to the more straightforward ones here.

Of course there was a lot of freedom in improvising divisions, but we can write some rules which govern the process in a general way:

- ☞ Form an element of a division by starting with a note of the melody and ending with the next note of the melody.
- ☞ Divisions consist mainly of scale like passages. Intervals larger than 2nds may be used sparingly.
- ☞ Divisions should be reasonably consistent with the underlying harmony of the piece.
- ☞ Divisions should not include simple arpeggiations of the harmony. That suggests tonal relationships that didn't evolve for another century or two.
- ☞ Insert accidentals necessary to make passages smoother, as dictated by "good taste".

The last point brings up the tricky subject of *musica ficta*, the practice of adding accidentals to notes to make them sound better to renaissance ears. That's tough for modern performers since we don't have renaissance ears. Editors help out by suggesting changes with accidentals over notes, but we're on our own in creating divisions. Two hints:

- ☞ When scale passages go up to the 7th scale degree and then turn around, flattening the 7th neutralizes the upward pull of the leading tone. In the example below, note the Bb inserted in the 2nd measure.

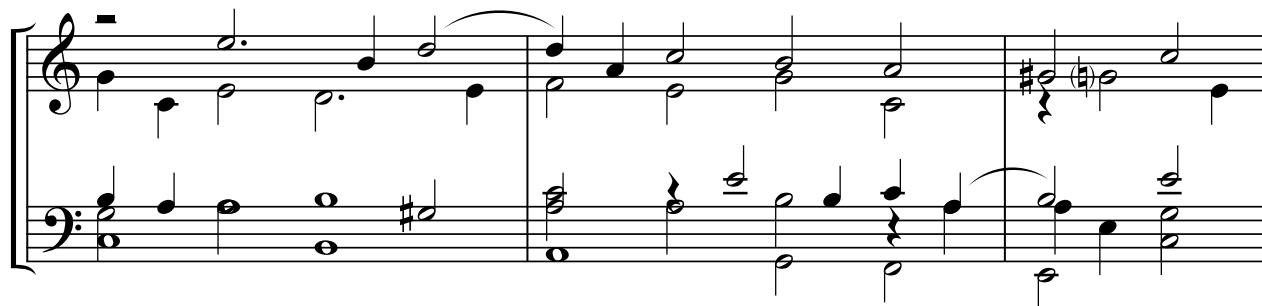
from *La Morisque* by Tielman Susato

Melody

Division

- ☛ Often clashes are introduced when a note is raised or lowered in one part but not another. These *cross relations* sound terrible to modern ears, but renaissance composers, especially the English, actually *liked* them and we can learn to love them, too. Here's an example from a famous piece by John Dowland. Note the clash between the G# and the G natural in the last measure.

from *Lachrimae Antiquae* by John Dowland



The moral is, don't worry too much about cross relation dissonances when making up divisions.

These "rules" are anything but rigid and exceptions abound in historical practice. You can find historical examples of divisions in the appendices, complete with plenty of transgressions against the rules.

Who Embellishes their Part?

Who performs embellishments depends on the nature of the music. In homophonic music like dances where the melody is in the top part and the other instruments mostly just play chordal accompaniment, all the embellishment should be done by the top part and that player can really go to town with elaborate graces and divisions. On the other hand, in polyphonic music like fantasies where all the parts are equally important, all players may embellish their parts but with considerable restraint, perhaps just adding a cadential patterns and a few other graces.

Articulation

In renaissance embellishment, especially divisions, performers have to play a lot of notes in a little bit of time. On wind instruments like the recorder, it's not too hard to get fingers moving, but tongues are generally a lot slower. There are three ways to approach the problem of rapid tonguing:

- ☞ Single tongue very fast.
- ☞ Slur.
- ☞ Double tongue.

Now some players just can single tongue really rapidly. If you're one of them, do it. It's simple and gives wonderful control. But most of us can't, and even those who can bump into physiological limits when the passagework is too fast.

Slurring is a common option in modern music, but it was frowned on in the renaissance. It's probably all right to slur very, very fast divisions, so long as only a small number of notes are slurred at a time. Likewise, it may be necessary to slur graces in fast tempos. But whatever you do, don't fall into a slur-two-tongue-two pattern because that was never used in early music.

Historical instruction books spent a lot of time on double tonguing with a plethora of tonguing syllables. It is a much vexed subject. Oversimplifying a bit, double tonguing possibilities reduce to two options:

- ☞ Modern double tonguing in which alternates the syllables te-ke for duple meters and te-ke-te for triple meters.
- ☞ Historical tonguing, the most easy and effective of which uses the syllables di-del for duple meters and di-del-di for triple meters.

Modern tonguing is easy to learn and produces a nice staccato separation of notes. It's a good special purpose tonguing, especially useful when notes are repeated rapidly, but it's too choppy for general use. Renaissance writers mention this tonguing sometimes, but they didn't like it much.

Historical tonguing is much harder to learn, but it's quite versatile once it's mastered. The effect is that of a rapid legato tonguing. This is the kind of tonguing which you should use for most divisions.

The first problem in learning historical tonguing is aspirating the “del” syllable. Practice this by holding your hand in front of your mouth while you say “di-del, de-del.” When you feel a nice little puff of air on both syllables, you’re ready to move on to your recorder. Practice the tonguing slowly on scale passages or the scale-like etudes of your choice. My personal favorite is

☞ Hans Ulrich Staeps (1970), edited by Gerald Burakoff. *Nine Basic Exercises for Alto Recorder*, New York, Consort Music.

Then work it into solo music, starting with short passages. It takes a while to master the trick of it (it took me a year or two!), so be patient. It’s worth the effort. As a happy bonus, that tonguing was also used in the baroque, so you’ll get lots of use out of it.

Working Out Embellishments with Pencil and Paper

The first step to learning renaissance embellishment is to work out some examples on manuscript paper. Here are the steps you follow:

- ☞ Rule the manuscript paper into systems of at least four staves.
- ☞ On the top staff, write the unadorned melody.
- ☞ On the 2nd staff, add some graces to the melody. (In the example above, I’ve written out the graces which requires some pretty tedious arithmetic. In fact it’s much easier to play the graces than to write them down, so you might prefer to just use symbols like those I introduced earlier.)
- ☞ On the 3rd staff, write divisions on the melody.
- ☞ On the 4th staff, combine the graces of the 2nd staff with the divisions of the 3rd.
- ☞ Add more staves to work out more divisions, if you like.

Here’s an example, a coranto from *Parthenia In-Violata*:

CORANTO

ANONYMOUS

The musical score for 'CORANTO' by ANONYMOUS is presented in four staves. The first staff, labeled 'MELODY', shows a simple melodic line in 2/4 time. The second staff, 'MELODY WITH GRACES', adds grace notes to the melody. The third staff, 'DIVISIONS', shows the division of the melody into rhythmic patterns. The fourth staff, 'DIVISIONS & GRACES', combines the division patterns with grace notes. The score is divided into two systems, with a measure rest '5' at the beginning of the second system.

The appendices give some helpful historical examples. Ganassi gave hundreds of examples of connecting intervals with division patterns. I've included a selection of these in the first appendix. You can appropriate them directly for your divisions or, better, just

use them for inspiration. Subsequent appendices include examples of divisions written for recorder, viol, and harpsichord that you can use as models. The last appendix gives some examples for you to complete along with some manuscript paper for your own exercises.

Once you've worked out an embellished version of a melody, the obvious next step is to prop it up on the music stand and play it next time you perform the piece. **Don't do it!** Embellishment is an extemporaneous art and you've got to liberate yourself from little black marks on the page. If you really like your embellishment, learn to play it from memory. Then you're not looking at the music and with a little luck you'll have a memory slip and make up something fresh! Then you're improvising embellishments just like they did in the 16th century.

Practical Considerations

Extemporizing embellishments is pretty scary at first. Here are some practical suggestions to help you get started:

- ☛ Start by adding a few simple graces to the melody.
- ☛ The next step is to add a few simple patterns for divisions. Start by just filling in melodic intervals, then learn a pattern or two for ascending and descending scales. Here are some examples:

filling intervals



divisions for scales



- ☛ Don't worry about producing elaborate embellishments at first. Even adding few graces can make a repetition more convincing. Start with simple stuff and the rest will come along later.

The Appendices

The appendices are musical examples to supplement the text material. Here's a list of them:

- A. Sylvestro Ganassi's *passaggi*
- B. Divisions from Jakob van Eyck's *Der Fluiten-Lusthof*
- C. Divisions on a ground bass by Christopher Simpson
- D. Divisions from *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*
- E. Some exercises in constructing divisions

Sylvestro Ganassi's Passaggi

In *Fontegara*, published in 1535, Ganassi says "...remember that every division must begin and end with the same note as the unornamented ground....so doing, it will be a tastefully constructed ornament." He produces dozens of examples of this. The ones below are selected from his *Regola Prima*. *Regola Seconda* and *Regola Terza* show more complicated ways of dividing the beat, including quintuple and sextuple patterns.

The musical score is organized into three main sections: Unison, Ascending 2nds, and Descending 2nds. Each section contains six measures of music, each with a specific label above it.

- Unison:** Six measures labeled 1a through 1n. Measure 1a is a whole note. Measures 1b through 1n show various rhythmic divisions of the beat.
- Ascending 2nds:** Six measures labeled +2a through +2p. Measures +2a through +2m show various rhythmic divisions of the beat. Measure +2n is a whole note. Measure +2p is a whole note.
- Descending 2nds:** Six measures labeled -2a through -2l. Measures -2a through -2m show various rhythmic divisions of the beat. Measure -2n is a whole note. Measure -2l is a whole note.

ascending
3rds

+3a +3b +3c +3d +3e +3f
+3g +3h +3i +3j +3k
+3l +3m +3n

descending
3rds

-3a -3b -3c -3d -3e -3f
-3g -3h -3i -3j -3k

ascending
4ths

+4a +4b +4c +4d +4e +4f
+4g +4h +4i +4j +4k +4l
+4m +4n +4o +4p
+4q +4r

descending
4ths

-4a -4b -4c -4d -4e -4f
-4g -4h -4i -4j -4k

ascending
5ths

descending
5ths

The image displays two sets of musical exercises for ascending and descending 5ths. The ascending section consists of four staves of music, each starting with a whole note followed by a series of eighth notes. The exercises are labeled +5a through +5p. The descending section also consists of four staves, each starting with a whole note followed by a series of eighth notes. The exercises are labeled -5a through -5o. The notation is in treble clef and includes various rhythmic patterns such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and triplets.

Psalm 118 (excerpt) from the *Der Fluiten Lust-Hof*

Van Eyck's variations for solo recorder on tunes of the day were published in 1646.

Jacob van Eyck

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes a 'melody' staff and four 'divisions' (labeled 1, 2, 3, and 4). The second system continues the four divisions. All staves are in treble clef with a common time signature. The melody consists of four measures of music. The divisions are variations of the melody, with increasing complexity and ornamentation from division 1 to 4. Division 1 is a simple stepwise melody. Division 2 adds eighth-note patterns. Division 3 introduces sixteenth-note runs. Division 4 features rapid sixteenth-note passages and trills. The second system shows the continuation of these variations, with the melody staff providing a reference for the original tune.

Psalm 118 (excerpt)—continued

The image displays a musical score for an excerpt of Psalm 118, continuing from a previous page. The score is arranged in two systems, each containing four staves. The first system is marked with a '7' at the beginning of each staff, indicating the start of measure 7. The second system is marked with a '10' at the beginning of each staff, indicating the start of measure 10. The music is written in a common time signature (C) and features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. The notation includes stems, beams, and note heads, with some notes beamed together in groups. The overall style is that of a traditional musical score for a small ensemble or choir.

Onder de Linde groene (excerpt) from *Der Fluiten Lust-Hof*

The image displays a musical score for a flute duet. It consists of six systems of staves. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and two flute parts (treble clefs, labeled 1 and 2). The music is in common time (C) and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes. A key signature change to one sharp (F#) occurs in the second system. A specific annotation in the fourth system reads: "the measure below is by Carl Dolmetsch". The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of the sixth system.

Van Eyck's *Fluiten Lust-Hof*

Breaking the Ground by Christopher Simpson

In the 1659 edition of *The Division-Viol*, Christopher Simpson showed in considerable detail how to play variations on a ground bass. The following is his first example of "breaking a ground". Note how the divisions take advantage of the great range of the viola da gamba.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 4, and the second system contains measures 5 through 8. The top staff is labeled 'ground bass' and features a single melodic line in a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a common time signature. The four staves below are labeled 'divisions' and are numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4. Each division is a variation of the ground bass, showing increasing complexity and range. Division 1 is a simple eighth-note pattern. Division 2 adds some grace notes and a sharp. Division 3 features more intricate sixteenth-note patterns. Division 4 is the most complex, with rapid sixteenth-note passages and a wide range of notes, including some in the higher register. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 8.

The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book is a manuscript of keyboard music by Francis Tregian, written between 1609 and 1619 while he was imprisoned in the Fleet. In it, Tregian frequently follows a straight exposition of a tune by an embellished repetition. Often the embellishment involves both hands of the player, but in the examples below Tregian confined himself to divisions of the melody for the right hand.

from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book Nowel's Galliard

Martin Peerson

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with two staves. The top staff of each system is labeled 'melody' and the bottom staff is labeled 'division'. Both staves are in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. The melody consists of simple eighth and quarter notes, while the division is a highly rhythmic and technically demanding piece of keyboard music featuring sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often in beamed pairs or groups. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 7, 13, and 19 indicated at the beginning of their respective systems. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the final system.

from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book
The Fall of the Leaf

Martin Peerson

The image displays a musical score for 'The Fall of the Leaf' by Martin Peerson, arranged in two systems. Each system consists of two staves. The first system (measures 1-6) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a complex, rhythmic accompaniment. The second system (measures 7-12) continues the piece, with measure 7 marked by a '7' above the staff. The third system (measures 13-18) concludes the piece, with measure 13 marked by a '13' above the staff. The score is written in a single system of two staves per system, with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.

from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book
The Primrose

Martin Peerson

The musical score for 'The Primrose' by Martin Peerson is presented in two staves. The piece is in common time (C) and consists of 14 measures. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and accidentals (sharps and flats). The first staff (treble clef) features a melodic line with a dotted quarter note at the beginning. The second staff (treble clef) provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The score is divided into four systems, with measure numbers 3, 9, and 14 indicated at the start of each system. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the 14th measure.

EXERCISES

WRITE AN EMBELLISHED VERSION OF THE MELODY IN STAFF 1 IN STAVES 2 AND 3.

LA BOURÉE BY MICHAEL PRAETORIUS

MELODY

DIVISIONS

1

2

MELODY

DIVISIONS

1

2

MELODY

DIVISIONS

1

2

EXERCISES

E1

LA BOURÉE, CONTINUED

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

DEUTSCHE TANZ BY MELCHIOR FRANCK

MELODY

The first exercise consists of a single melody line on a treble clef staff. The melody begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The next measure contains a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note G4. The final measure contains a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a quarter note D4. Below the melody are two empty treble clef staves, labeled '1' and '2' on the left, intended for accompaniment.

MELODY

The second exercise features a melody line on a treble clef staff. It starts with a half note G4, followed by a quarter rest. The next measure contains quarter notes A4 and B4. The following measure has quarter notes C5 and B4. The next measure contains quarter notes A4 and G4. The final measure contains quarter notes F4, E4, and D4. Below the melody are two empty treble clef staves, labeled '1' and '2' on the left, intended for accompaniment.

MELODY

The third exercise has a melody line on a treble clef staff. It begins with a half note G4, followed by a quarter rest. The next measure contains a half note A4. The following measure contains quarter notes B4, C5, and B4. The next measure contains quarter notes A4 and G4. The final measure contains quarter notes F4, E4, and D4. Below the melody are two empty treble clef staves, labeled '1' and '2' on the left, intended for accompaniment.

DEUTSCHE TANZ, CONTINUED

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

LACHRIMAE BY JOHN DOWLAND

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

LACHRIMAE BY JOHN DOWLAND

MELODY

1

2

MELODY

1

2

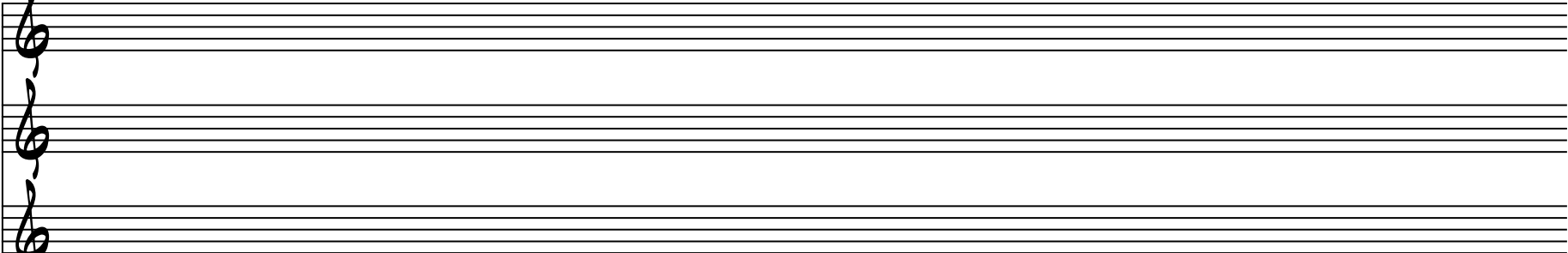
MELODY

1

2

(MANUSCRIPT PAPER FOR YOUR OWN EXAMPLES)

MELODY

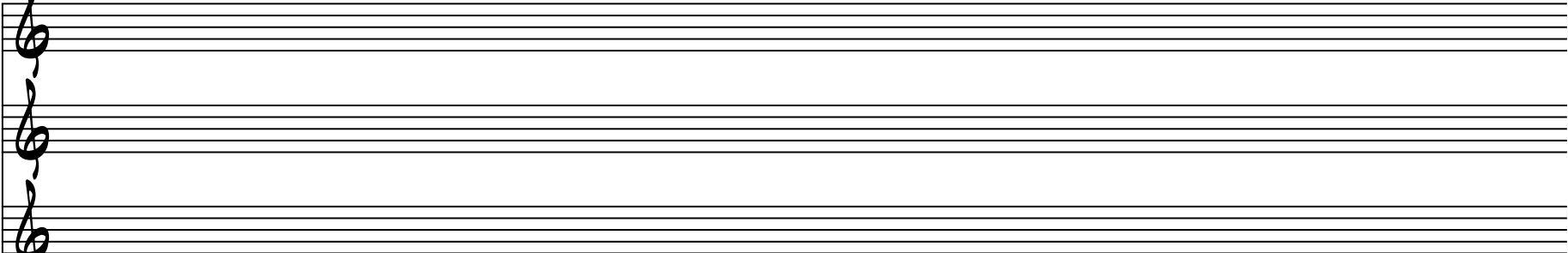


1

2

This system consists of three five-line musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'MELODY' and contains a treble clef. The middle and bottom staves are grouped by a bracket on the left, with the number '1' next to the middle staff and '2' next to the bottom staff. Each staff contains a treble clef.

MELODY

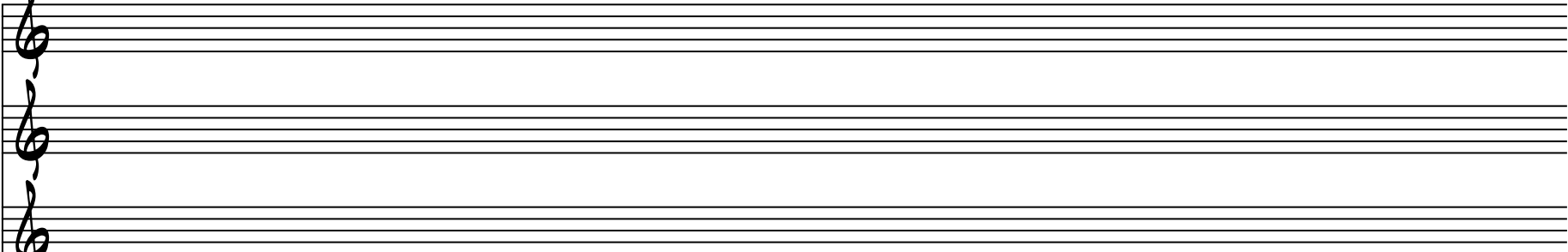


1

2

This system consists of three five-line musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'MELODY' and contains a treble clef. The middle and bottom staves are grouped by a bracket on the left, with the number '1' next to the middle staff and '2' next to the bottom staff. Each staff contains a treble clef.

MELODY



1

2

This system consists of three five-line musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'MELODY' and contains a treble clef. The middle and bottom staves are grouped by a bracket on the left, with the number '1' next to the middle staff and '2' next to the bottom staff. Each staff contains a treble clef.